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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to learn more about voters' use and perception of endorsements in the 1984 presidential election. Six interviewers were trained and then assigned to a random sample of precincts in Orlando, Florida, on the day of the 1984 presidential election. Each interviewer stopped every third voter and asked those willing to cooperate 12 questions. The interviewers approached 562 voters and completed 426 interviews. The results showed that (1) candidates endorsed by the local daily newspaper are more likely to win their elections than are their unendorsed opponents, (2) endorsed candidates receive more votes than unendorsed candidates from the same party, and (3) voters are more likely to support issues or referenda than candidates endorsed by their local daily newspaper. Three variables helped predict the number of endorsed candidates that respondents could remember: their sex, education, and frequency of newspaper reading. Endorsements seemed most likely to help voters who were male, middle aged, and frequent newspaper readers. A total of 24.3% respondents agreed that endorsements had helped them decide who to vote for. (DF)

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Exit Polls Reveal More About Voters' Use Of Endorsements

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Exit Polls Reveal More About Voters' Use Of Endorsements

A dozen researchers have studied newspaper endorsements and their effects in U.S. elections. Many of those researchers compared the endorsements published by newspapers with the votes cast in elections. Because of their methodology, the researchers reported correlations rather than cause-and-effect relationships. Other researchers have conducted phone interviews before and after elections.

To learn more about voters' use and perceptions of endorsements, the authors of this study conducted exit polls on the day of the 1984 presidential election.

The previous studies generally agree that endorsements are most effective in local elections, particularly (1) nonpartisan elections and (2) elections with large numbers of candidates. For example: in 1964, Illinois voters selected all 177 of their state representatives in an at-large election. Eighty-five percent of the state's voters marked a straight party ticket. Nevertheless, candidates endorsed by Chicago's Field papers received an average of 24,341 more votes than their non-endorsed opponents.[1]

McDowell studied the endorsements that 15 daily newspapers published during the Illinois election and also found that, "Those newspapers which chose to make specific recommendations to their readers, particularly in the Chicago metropolitan area, had a significant influence on the outcome...."[2] Similarly, Mason found that all 40 Republicans endorsed by several newspapers won, and that "...endorsements by themselves provided a winning margin."[3]

Thirty-three candidates entered another unusual election, a mayoral race in Albuquerque. The city's two daily newspapers endorsed the same candidate, and Hain attributed 5 to 7 percentage points "to the editorial endorsements."[4]

Even more candidates -- 133 -- entered a Los Angeles election for a new Junior College Board of Trustees. Mueller reported that candidates endorsed by the Los Angeles Times attracted an extra 24,000 votes, and that candidates endorsed by the smaller Herald-Examiner attracted an extra 9,000.[5]

Gregg found that endorsements are most effective in local elections. Eighty-four percent of the local candidates endorsed by 11 California dailies won their elections, compared to 73.8% of the state candidates and to 65% of the presidential candidates.[6] Gregg also noted three additional trends. First, endorsements for candidates from a normally rival party are especially persuasive. Second, newcomers who are unfamiliar with local issues may be especially dependent upon the endorsements. Third, "Reader confidence in a newspaper is important."

McCombs interviewed 61 voters the day after an election in Los Angeles and found that: "The last-minute deciders were the major factor in the outcome. It is among this group that editorial endorsements have the greatest opportunity to influence."[7] McCombs also hypothesized that newspaper endorsements are most likely to influence independent voters, voters in non-partisan elections, and voters who receive little information or conflicting information from other sources.

Other researchers have found that endorsements affect some voters in presidential elections. However, their studies disagree about the number of voters affected in those elections.

After studying five recent presidential elections, Robinson concluded that the candidates endorsed by newspapers receive an extra 7% of the votes.[8] In a second study, Robinson found that they receive an extra 6%.[9] Similarly, Fedler, Counts, and Stephens reported that all three candidates in the 1980 presidential election -- but especially Carter and Anderson -- received more votes cast in the cities with daily newspapers that endorsed their candidacies.[10]

On the other hand, Hurd and Singletary said endorsements in the 1980 election swayed fewer than 1% of the votes and are unlikely to influence the outcome of presidential elections.[11] Hurd and Singletary found no evidence to support the notion that endorsements affect some types of voters more than others.

Gafke and Leuthold reported that well-educated voters are more likely to read, remember, and be influenced by endorsements. Gafke and Leuthold also reported that endorsed candidates received an average of 2% more votes, but that the variations in different elections were substantial. Some endorsements seemed to have a negative effect.[12]

Thus, these and other studies generally support the principles that endorsements are most effective:

*In local elections

*In non-partisan elections

*When the candidates are not well known

*When the endorsements are published early in a campaign

*When an unusually large number of candidates is on the ballot

*When the endorsements are published by a large, prestigious daily

*When voters cast their ballots for issues or referenda rather than for individuals

*When voters are poorly informed about a race, do not have access to other sources of information, or receive conflicting information

Fragmentary or disputed evidence suggests that endorsements for candidates from a rival party are especially effective. Also, some voters may be more susceptible than others, particularly: (1) newcomers, (2) independents, and (3) the well-educated.

However, few of the previous studies have asked voters to describe their perceptions of the issues. Moreover, none of the studies have considered the possibility that voters may consult news stories and editorials while preparing a sample ballot, then may carry that sample ballot into a voting booth.

The issues are likely to interest professionals as well as academicians. The number of daily newspapers remaining uncommitted during presidential elections has risen from 22.6% in 1964 to 32.7% in 1984. Many of the editors remaining uncommitted explain that endorsements are ineffective. Thus, if new studies find that endorsements do influence voters, more of the editors may begin to publish the endorsements.

Methodology

The authors trained six interviewers, then assigned them to a random sample of precincts in Orlando, Fla., on the day of the 1984 presidential election. Five of the interviewers remained in the same precincts all day. The sixth served as a substitute during their lunch hours, so all five precincts were manned all day: from 7 a.m. until 7 p.m.

Florida law prohibits any type of solicitation within 100 yards of the entrance to any polling place, and its ban includes the gathering of opinions. After inspecting each polling place, the authors discussed the law with the interviewers, then told them to find the heaviest flow of pedestrian traffic just beyond that 100-yard limit and to interview voters at that point. The authors visited each interviewer twice on Election Day to monitor their progress.

Each interviewer stopped every third voter. If a voter refused to cooperate, the interviewer recorded the time and the voter's sex and race, then interviewed the next third voter.

Each respondent was asked 12 questions. The first two questions asked whether the respondents had carried a sample ballot or list of candidates into the voting booths and whether they had looked back at any news stories or editorials while preparing their lists.

Other questions asked: (1) whether the respondents thought newspaper endorsements were helpful, (2) whether the respondents thought endorsements were more

helpful in local or in national races, and (3) whether any newspaper endorsements had helped the respondents decide who to vote for. The respondents also were asked to list individual candidates endorsed by The Orlando Sentinel.

The remaining questions asked for information previously associated with voting behavior: the number of years the respondents had lived in the area; their use of The Orlando Sentinel; and their age, education, and voter registration (Republican, Democrat, or Independent). Interviewers also recorded each respondent's sex and race, as well as unsolicited comments they made about the issues.

Three factors made Orlando an ideal city in which to conduct the study. First, Orlando is representative of the average American city. As a consequence, it's often used for marketing research. The number of persons living in the average household in the United States is 2.75; in Orlando, the average is 2.74. Similarly, the average age of people living in Orlando deviates less than 1% from the U.S. profile, and the average income deviates only 3%.

Second, The Orlando Sentinel provided a thorough coverage of every race, including an election guide published the Sunday before the election. The Sentinel also endorsed a candidate in almost all the races. As a consequence, voters could refer back to the paper's news stories while preparing a sample ballot. But even more importantly, voters also could refer back to its endorsements. All the endorsements were republished on the morning of Election Day.

Third, The Orlando Sentinel is the only daily newspaper in Orlando and is one of the best papers in Florida, and perhaps one of the best in the United States. In 1984, Time magazine rated The Sentinel "one of the better newspapers in the country." Similarly, Ad Week listed it among three "comers" in the newspaper industry.

Finally, the authors formulated eight hypotheses:

ONE: The candidates endorsed by the local daily are more likely to win their elections than are their unendorsed opponents.

TWO: Voters are more likely to support local than state or national candidates endorsed by their local daily.

THREE: Endorsed candidates will receive more votes than unendorsed candidates from the same party.

FOUR: Voters are more likely to support issues or referenda than candidates endorsed by their local daily.

FIVE: Voters who moved to the county recently are most likely to cast their ballots for the candidates endorsed by their local daily.

SIX: Voters who read their local daily most frequently are most likely to cast their ballots for the candidates endorsed by that daily.

SEVEN: Voters registered as independents are more likely to cast their ballots for candidates endorsed by their local daily than are voters registered as Republicans or Democrats.

EIGHT: Well-educated voters are more likely to cast their ballots for candidates endorsed by their local daily than are poorly educated voters.

Findings

Some preliminary findings have already been reported.[13] Briefly, the interviewers stopped 562 voters and completed 426 interviews (75.8%). Nine percent of the respondents said endorsements published by The Orlando Sentinel were "very helpful," and 38% said they were "somewhat helpful." About 17% said they were "not very helpful," and 29% said they were "not helpful at all." Five percent did not know or did not respond.

Respondents who said the endorsements were not helpful usually explained that they "don't need any help," "use my own judgment," or "would rather not be told who to vote for." Others said they decided who to vote for before The Orlando Sentinel published its endorsements.

Several respondents added that voters who depend upon the media for advice are "uninformed," "ignorant," or "mindless." Critics also insisted that the endorsements are evidence of the media's bias. Several called the endorsements "slanted," "one-sided," "prejudiced," or "propaganda."

Sixty-four percent of the respondents who considered the endorsements helpful added that they were more helpful in local than in national elections. Only 14.8% said the endorsements were more helpful in national elections. Twenty-one percent said the endorsements were equally helpful in all the elections, did not know, or did not respond.

When asked to list some candidates endorsed by The Orlando Sentinel, 267 respondents (62.8%) were unable to name any. However, 16.2% were able to name one candidate, 7.6% named two, 4.5% named three, 3.2% named 4, and 3.4% named five or more. Moreover, 102 respondents (24.3%) agreed with the statement that newspapers endorsements helped them decide who to vote for. That figure -- 24.3% -- is considerably higher than reported by any previous study.

About 24% of the respondents added that they had prepared a sample ballot and carried that sample ballot into a voting booth. Moreover, 50.8% of those respondents said they had consulted The Orlando Sentinel's news stories or editorials while preparing the ballot.

The election results seem to support three of the first four hypotheses.

Voters in Orlando were able to cast their ballots for 17 candidates endorsed by The Orlando Sentinel: 8 local candidates, 7 state candidates, and 2 national candidates. The candidates included 7 Republicans, 7 Democrats, and 3 non-partisans. All three non-partisans were seeking judgeships; 2 of the 3 ran unopposed.

All 7 Republicans and 5 of the 7 Democrats endorsed by The Orlando Sentinel won their elections. The results support the first hypothesis, which states that the candidates endorsed by the local daily are more likely to win their elections than are their unendorsed opponents.

Considering only the partisan candidates, 100% of the local candidates endorsed by The Orlando Sentinel won, compared with 60% of the state candidates, and with 100% of the national candidates. The local candidates received an average of 63.9% of the votes cast in their elections, compared with 56.4% for the state candidates, and with 59.6% for the national candidates.

The results fail to consistently support the second hypothesis, which states that voters are more likely to support local than state or national candidates endorsed by their local daily.

As predicted, both the endorsed Democrats and the endorsed Republicans received larger percentages of the votes than did their unendorsed colleagues. Seven Democrats endorsed by The Orlando Sentinel received an average of 62% of the votes cast in their elections, compared with an average of 40.8% received by the unendorsed Democrats. Similarly, seven Republicans endorsed by The Orlando Sentinel received an average of 59.2% of the votes cast in their elections, compared with an average of 38% received by the unendorsed Republicans.

The results support the third hypothesis, which states that endorsed candidates will receive more votes than unendorsed candidates from the same party.

The Orlando Sentinel also endorsed 6 proposed amendments to the Florida Constitution. All six amendments endorsed by The Orlando Sentinel won a majority of the ballots cast in Orlando. The Orlando Sentinel opposed two other amendments. One of those amendments passed, and the other failed. The average amendment endorsed by The Orlando Sentinel received 77.4% of the votes cast in Orlando. One unendorsed amendment received 68.7% of the votes, and the other received 28.7%.

The average candidate endorsed by The Orlando Sentinel received 60.6% of the votes cast in Orlando, compared to the 77.4% cast for the average amendment endorsed by The Orlando Sentinel. The results support the fourth hypothesis, which states that voters are more likely to support issues or referenda than candidates endorsed by their local daily.

The authors performed multiple linear regression analyses to determine which variables helped predict: (1) the endorsements' helpfulness, and (2) the number of endorsed candidates that each respondent could remember. Two variables helped predict the endorsements' helpfulness: the respondents' (1) age and (2) frequency of newspaper reading. Five variables failed to help predict the endorsements' helpfulness: the respondents' sex, race, education, political party, and length of residence in the area. Similarly, three variables helped predict the number of endorsed candidates that respondents could remember: their (1) sex, (2) education, and (3) frequency of newspaper reading.

These findings conflict with some of our hypotheses and with some of the previous research. Thus, some observations about each variable may be of interest.

We hypothesized that voters who had recently moved to Orlando and therefore might be unfamiliar with local issues would find the endorsements published by The Orlando Sentinel most helpful. Our findings reject this notion. Residents who had lived in the area fewer than 6 years were not more likely to say the endorsements were "very helpful" or "somewhat helpful" (58.8% to 50.5%). New residents who considered the endorsements helpful were more likely than established residents to say the endorsements were helpful in national rather than in local elections. Twenty-seven percent of the new residents considered the endorsements most helpful in national elections, compared to 14.0% of the established residents ($X^2 = 4.4$, $p = .04$).

We also hypothesized that the endorsements were most likely to influence well-educated voters. Our findings are mixed.

When asked if the endorsements helped them decide who to vote for in the 1984 election, 76.8% of the college graduates and 76.1% of the non-graduates said they were not helped. Similarly, 57.5% of the graduates and 48.4% of the non-graduates considered endorsements, generally, as either "very helpful" or as "somewhat helpful."

Despite those similarities, the college graduates were able to list more candidates endorsed by The Orlando Sentinel. Fifteen percent of the college graduates listed three or more endorsed candidates, compared with 6.2% of the non-college graduates ($X^2 = 16.1$, $p < .01$). College graduates who read a newspaper every day also listed more candidates than non-graduates who read a newspaper every day. Thirty percent of the college graduates who read a newspaper every day listed three or more candidates, compared to 11.2% of the non-graduates ($X^2 = 15.5$, $p < .01$).

We also hypothesized that the respondents' party affiliations might affect their use of newspaper endorsements. Independent voters, who are not bound by any party loyalties, might be more likely to use newspaper endorsements. However, our findings fail to support either of those assumptions. The responses of independent voters were not significantly different from the responses of Republicans or Democrats.

As we hypothesized, however, the respondents who read a daily newspaper most frequently considered the endorsements most helpful. Those respondents also were most likely to recall the names of candidates endorsed by The Orlando Sentinel. When asked to rate the endorsements on a scale of "1" (very helpful) to "4" (not helpful at all), the mean for persons who read a paper fewer than two times a week was 2.98, compared to 2.45 for persons who read a paper 2 or 3 times a week, and to 2.64 for daily readers ($F = 2.9$, $p = .04$). Only 39.6% of the least frequent readers

considered the endorsements "very helpful" or "somewhat helpful," compared to 53.6% of the daily readers and to 64.9% of the two- or three-times-a-week readers ($X^2 = 8.6$, $p = .01$).

Daily readers also were more likely to say the endorsements helped them decide who to vote for in the 1984 elections. Almost one-third of the daily readers said the endorsements helped them, compared to 20.0% of the two- or three-times-a-week readers, and to 18.5% of the less frequent readers ($X^2 = 6.4$, $p = .04$). Similarly, frequent readers were able to list more endorsed candidates. Eighteen percent of the daily readers listed three or more endorsed candidates, compared to 3.0% of the two- or three-times-a-week readers, and to 1.7% of the less frequent readers.

Curiously, less frequent readers who considered the endorsements "very helpful" or "somewhat helpful" were more likely to say that the endorsements were helpful in national rather than local elections. One-third of the less frequent readers said the endorsements were helpful in national elections, compared with 21% of the two- or three-times-a-week readers, and with 12.8% of the daily readers ($X^2 = 6.96$, $p = .03$).

We had not hypothesized about the effects of age. But the findings indicate that middle-aged voters (35 to 54) responded differently from younger and older voters. Nearly one-third of the middle-aged voters said the endorsements were helpful, compared to only 20.6% of the younger voters and to 22.8% of the older voters ($X^2 = 4.3$, $p = .04$). Middle-aged voters also were able to list more endorsed candidates than younger or older voters. The mean for middle-aged respondents was .99, for younger respondents .44, and for older respondents .68 ($F = 7.5$, $p < .001$). Scheffe tests indicate that each of those differences is significant. Furthermore, 12.8% of the middle-aged voters were able to list four or more endorsed candidates, as opposed to 2.8% of the younger voters, and to 4.4% of the older voters ($X^2 = 21.29$, $p = .02$).

Older voters considered the endorsements least helpful. On the 4-point scale, the mean for older voters was 2.89, for younger voters 2.60, and for middle-aged voters 2.60 ($F = 3.4$, $p = .04$). Similarly, 41.8% of the older voters considered the endorsements "not helpful at all," compared to 25.2% of the younger voters, and to 26.8% of the middle-aged voters.

We also failed to hypothesize that the respondents' sex would affect their use of endorsements. However, men were able to list a mean of .87 candidates, while women listed .51 ($t = 3.14$, $p < .01$). About 14.5% of the men, but only 7.5% of the women, were able to list three or more candidates endorsed by The Orlando Sentinel ($X^2 = 11.5$, $p = .04$).

Discussion

The results are puzzling. Different studies, conducted at different times and in different cities, continue to obtain different results.

Most studies, like this one, have found that the candidates endorsed by newspapers receive more votes than their unendorsed opponents. But the studies have not been able to agree upon the reasons why they receive more votes, nor to agree upon the types of voters most likely to be influenced by the endorsements.

Using a new methodology, this study found that a surprisingly large number of respondents consider the endorsements helpful, particularly in local and in non-partisan elections. About one-third of the respondents were able to name at least one candidate endorsed by The Orlando Sentinel, and a surprising 24.3% agreed that the endorsements had helped them decide who to vote for.

The candidates endorsed by newspapers may win their elections because everyone -- both the editors and the voters -- agree that they are the best candidates, not because the endorsements published by newspapers influence the voters. In that case, future studies might focus upon the reasons for

the apparent congruence of opinions. Future studies also might continue to examine voters' use of sample ballots, and their apparent reliance upon newspaper stories and editorials while preparing those ballots.

Yet other data uncovered by this study revealed that the respondents' sex, age, and reading habits may be related to their use of endorsements -- that the endorsements do seem to influence some types of voters more than others. Thus, the endorsements may have some impact, but the full extent of that impact, and all the reasons for it, remain a mystery.

Summary

The authors assigned six interviewers to a random sample of the precincts in Orlando, Fla., on the day of the 1984 presidential election. The interviewers stopped 562 voters and completed 426 interviews. Forty-seven percent of the respondents considered endorsements published by The Orlando Sentinel "very" or "somewhat" helpful. Moreover, 33% were able to name at least one candidate endorsed by The Orlando Sentinel, and 24.3% agreed that newspaper endorsements helped them decide who to vote for.

All 7 Republicans, and 5 of the 7 Democrats endorsed by The Orlando Sentinel won their elections. Both the endorsed Democrats and the endorsed Republicans received more votes than their unendorsed colleagues. The Orlando Sentinel also endorsed six amendments to the state constitution, and all 6 received a majority of the votes cast in Orlando.

The endorsements seemed most likely to help voters who were: (1) male, (2) middle-aged, and (3) frequent newspaper readers. The voters' party affiliations and the number of years they lived in Orlando seemed unrelated to their use of endorsements. Evidence about the relationship between the respondents' educational levels and their use of the endorsements was mixed.

Footnotes

[1]Michael Hooper, "Party and Newspaper Endorsement as Predictors of Voter Choice," Journalism Quarterly, 46 (Summer 1964), p. 305.

[2]James L. McDowell, "The Role of Newspapers in Illinois' At-Large Election," Journalism Quarterly, 47 (Spring 1965), p. 284.

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[11]Robert E. Hurd and Michael W. Singletary, "Newspaper Endorsement Influence On the 1980 Presidential Election Vote," Journalism Quarterly, 61 (Summer 1984), p. 337.

[12]Roger A. Gafke and David A. Leuthold, "Why Some Editorial Endorsements are More Persuasive than Others," ANPA News Research Report, No. 37 (Oct. 27, 1982), p. 8.

[13]Fred Fedler, Ron F. Smith and Tim Counts, "Voter Uses And Perceptions Of Editorial Endorsements," a paper presented to the Newspaper Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication at its Southeastern Regional Colloquium in Athens, Ga., March 29-30, 1985.